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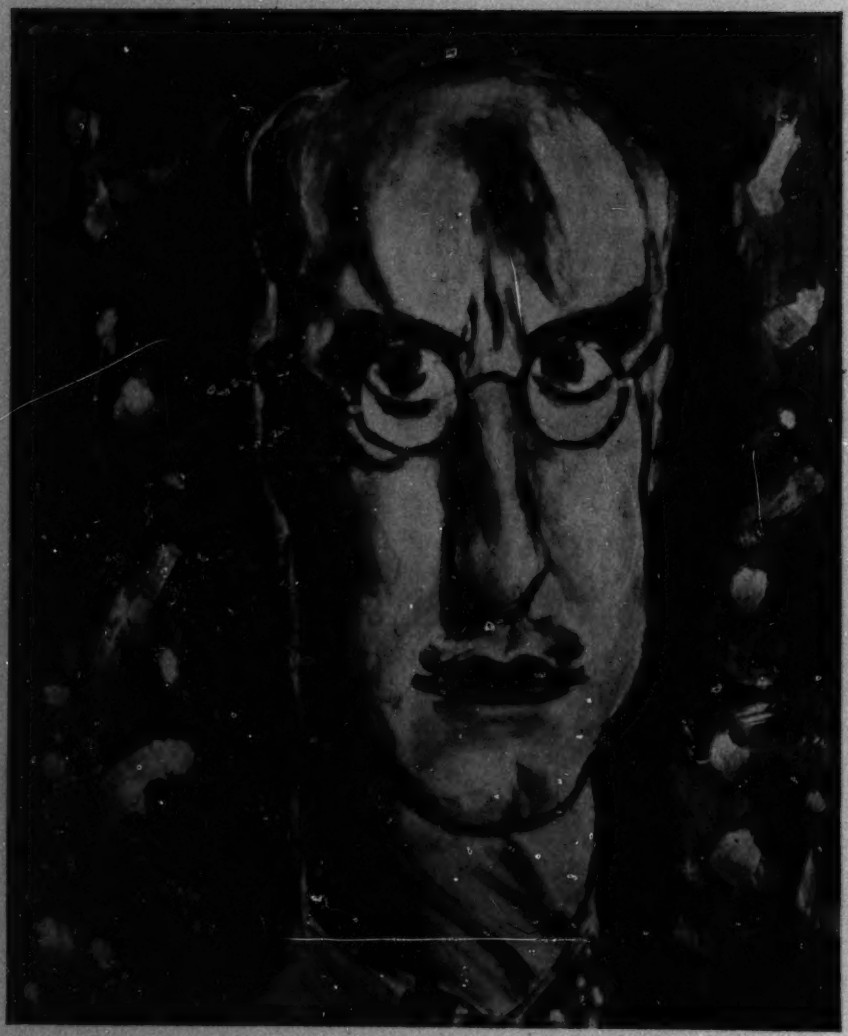


SELF PORTRAIT

ALFRED H. MAURER

1868-1932

By *ELIZABETH McCAUSLAND*

BUCHHOLZ GALLERY

CURT VALENTIN

32 EAST 57TH STREET, NEW YORK

VICTORIA AND ALBERT
LIBRARY

7. VII. 1943.

"Polar privacy" encompassed Alfred Maurer. Pursued by that "Single Hound, his own Identity," he lived, painted and in the end took his own life. A core of anguish must have steeled him through years as he confronted his image in the powerful self-portraits or looked on the face of the unknown woman seen again and again in his paintings. But, beyond private tragedy, Alfred Maurer was sustained by a view of life, not as mystical as Ryder's but surely as intense—the vision of a sensitive soul brooding on existence, tortured by loneliness, yet not wholly destroyed because his work was created and survives. Other artists have suffered in America, but none perhaps more profoundly.

Is Maurer to be studied as the silent spokesman of a generation of dispossessed Americans who found no roots at home? Insofar as the circumstances of his life are concerned, this may be true. Unquestionably American culture has evolved a type non-conformist creative worker who found fulfilment only in separation from American life. But Maurer's biography aside, it would be wiser—for the sake of our tradition and for a correct evaluation of his work—to study his paintings as a direct expression of his view of life, the totality of his thought and feeling, the summation of his living. Maurer's experience was characteristic: talent, even genius; success; revolt; long silence, and withdrawal into the solitude of his work. In this sense, Maurer's work was his life, and his life was his work; and the tragedy of his life must be read as the substance of his work.

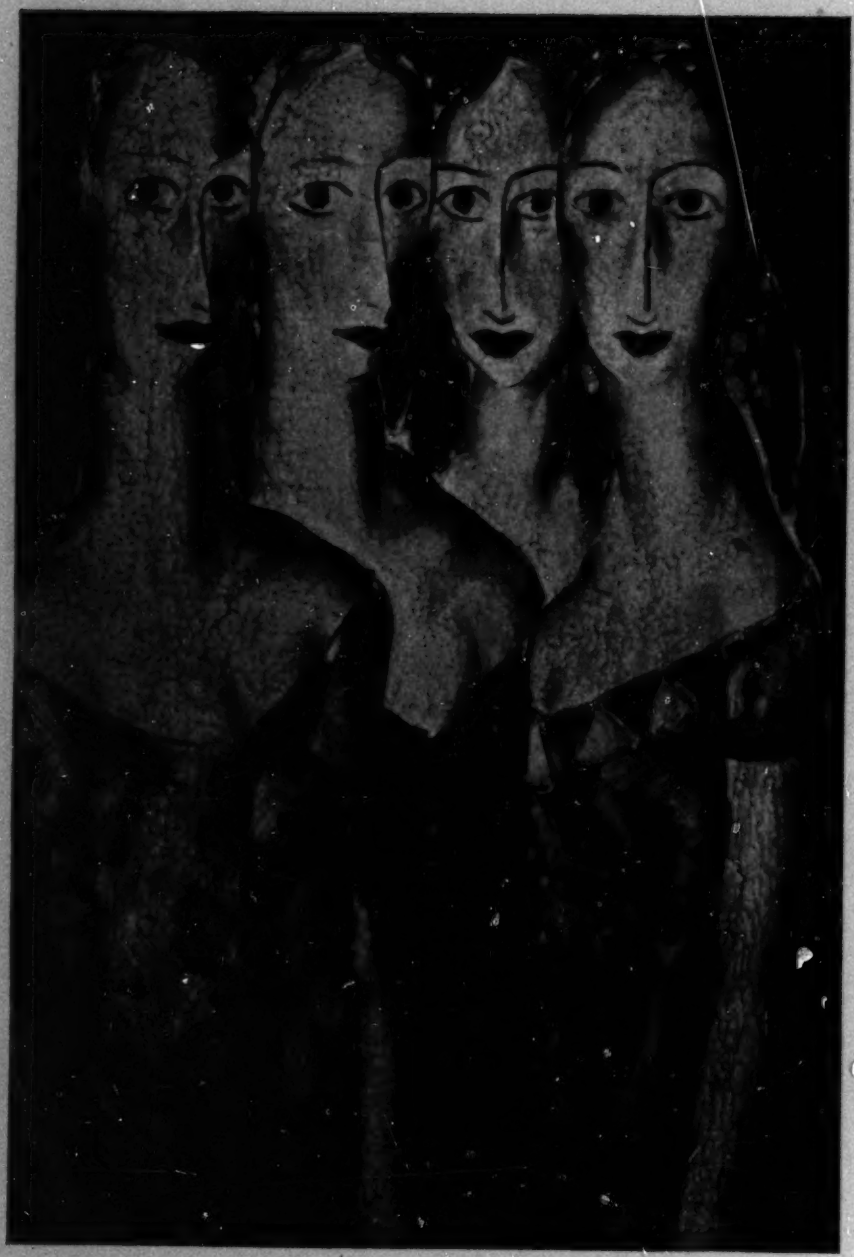
The facts of Maurer's life are fragmentary yet dramatic. Son of Currier-and-Ives artist Louis Maurer, Alfred Maurer lived always

LANDSCAPE

in the shadow of his father's worldly success. To such a degree was this true that two weeks after his father's death in 1932 at the age of 100, "Alfy" hanged himself in the family home on West Forty-Third Street. Trained at the National Academy of Design, he had won many honors early in his career, including the Carnegie first prize of $1500 in 1901. Going abroad in the 1900s, he abandoned Whistler, Sargent and William Merritt Chase for *fauvism*, allying himself (as is recorded in the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*) with the group of which Leo and Gertrude Stein were the center. In Paris, Maurer took the road of rebellion and experiment toward abstractionism. Till the first World War, he lived and worked in this congenial environment. Recalled to the United States by his father at the outbreak of the war, he continued to paint and to exhibit, but under an inhospitable sun. Loneliness became his life; and loneliness drove him at last to suicide.

The Weyhe exhibition of 1924 gave Maurer fresh encouragement, and buyers were found for his paintings, by this time considered less startling than they had seemed when first shown at "291" in 1909. But essentially, despite a good record of exhibition and press notice, Maurer remained unknown and unrecognized. Suicide gave him greater publicity than work had. Four one-man exhibitions since his death—these in 1932, 1934, 1935 and 1937—have presented his painting as an organic contribution to the American tradition; but still Maurer remains an undiscovered painter, surely a fate incommensurate with his stature. A number of oils and gouaches are in existence, chiefly of the period after his return to this country; and examples of his early academic period survive. But systematic study of the body of his work is still to be undertaken. When this is begun, dating of his paintings will call for careful stylistic examination and titling will depend—unless hidden data are miraculously discovered—almost entirely on the taste of whoever makes the study. In neglect and lack of appreciation, again Maurer resembles Ryder.

Due to the loss of the greater part of the work of his Paris years, a gap exists in his *oeuvre* which makes it necessary to discuss him



FOUR SISTERS

as a painter who had a childhood and a manhood but no youth. His mature style is far removed from National Academy *chefs d'oeuvre* such as the Carnegie prize-winning *Arrangement*. Yet study of his work in private and public collections could well bring to light enough examples of his painting from, say, 1905 to 1915, to bridge the gap. Knowing that Maurer renounced academicism for *fauvism*, what more would we know of his evolution as a painter if the complete production of those first years of rebellion survived? The question underlines the need for study of this important American painter.

By extant evidence, Maurer was not an artist who used art sheerly for self-expression or self-enhancement. Of course, his work is expressive of his experience as a human being; but it is also expressive of his concern with problems of his medium of painting, such as the physical characteristics of pigment and the formal questions of design and form. Two categories of content, parallel in chronology, may be noted: abstract still lifes, which—if a counterpart be required—approach the expression of Juan Gris more closely than that of any other of the comparable painters, and compositions in which recurs the portrait—single, double, triple, even quadruple—of a woman, a face which, whether interpreted as symbol or reality, visually dominates a main body of Maurer's subject matter. It is as if the energy of his life had split into two streams running side by side—the one devoted to esthetics, the other to the sublimation of personal experience. Yet it would be a mistake to separate Maurer's achievement into mechanical opposites of form and content: his abstract still lifes are not without emotion, and his portraits possess impressive formal qualities, variously stated in a classical linear idiom or in a modified cubist style.

To find a prototype in American culture for Alfred Maurer, one may turn to Emily Dickinson, whose life behind the rhododendrons was not more sequestered than Maurer's in his Forty-Third Street third floor back. This character is not a product unique to America, but it had a stern flowering here—separation of the artist from his

STILL-LIFE

people, loneliness of the creative worker, "A Soul admitted to Itself." Loneliness is not integral in the artist's life; but history has often compelled the artist to rationalize necessity into virtue. Perhaps Maurer did not; for is it not fortitude rather than rationalization he expresses? Again the statement should be qualified. Maurer's still lifes are serious but not stoical; and even his brooding portraits are not always tragic in import, but sometimes only withdrawn, as Maurer himself was.

It seems, too, that the cryptographer of Maurer's life and work can reconstruct the direction of his life from this very contrast of subject and mood. In the still lifes painted after his return to the United States the walls have not drawn too close; there is space to live. The will of the artist, one feels, was ever toward life, to resist bonds drawing tighter as the years went on. Thus one may hypothesize that even while Maurer painted the self-portraits from which he looks out on life to condemn its inclemency, he struggled also toward the flowering which would have been congenial to his soul, toward a humane and harmonious balance implicit in the personal qualities which won him the nickname "Alfy." Such was the conflict of Alfred Maurer's life,* a conflict which produced nevertheless a painter of major rank. Duality was not reserved for Maurer; but in Maurer duality was intensified until between narrow banks his life ran strong and tumultuous. The strength rather than the tumult we belatedly acknowledge.

*Further discussion of Alfred Maurer's struggle may be found in *The Emergence of an American Art* by Jerome Melquist, chapter VIII of which is entirely devoted to Maurer.

THE BRASS BOWL

CHRONOLOGY

1868 Alfred Henry Maurer born April 21, New York, N. Y.

Student at National Academy of Design, under J. Q. A. Ward and William Merritt Chase

c. 1900 To Paris to study, where he became a convert to the "New Movement" the first American to adopt the new doctrines

1901 First Prize, Carnegie International

1908 "Secessionist" movement in Paris

1909 Photo-Secession Gallery in New York gave Maurer his first one-man exhibition

1910 Exhibits at "291" in New York

1914 Returned to New York to live and work

1924 Exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery

1931 Much work destroyed by fire in Lincoln Square Building where Maurer had studio

1932 July 19, Louis Maurer dies at age of 100
August 4, Alfred Maurer hangs himself

ALFRED H. MAURER IN MUSEUMS

Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, Mass.

Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Memorial Hall Museum, Philadelphia, Pa.

Museum of Modern Art, New York, N. Y.

Museum of Western Art, Moscow, U. S. S. R.

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pa.

Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N. Y.

EXHIBITION
JUNE 1 TO 26

OILS

1. Still Life with Pear
2. Fruits and Blue Tablecloth
3. Landscape
4. Still Life
5. Still Life with Apples
6. Self Portrait
7. The Blue Napkin
8. Still Life
9. The Brass Bowl
10. Young Girl
11. Three Pears (?)
12. Portrait of a Man
13. Green Apples
14. Four Sisters
15. Head of a Woman

16. Plums and Pears

17. Portrait

18. Two Heads

19. The Brass Bowl II

20. Chair

21. Head of a Girl

22. Head in Landscape

23. Portrait

24. The Green Curtain

25. Head

GOUACHES

26. Still Life with Apples

27. Bowl and Pear

28. Still Life I

29. Still Life II

30. Still Life III

31. Landscape

DRAWINGS